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CHINESE LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IN TUCSON PUBLIC SCHOOLS--INDEPENDENT STUDY.

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A PROGRAM WAS BEGUN IN AUGUST 1967 TO TEACH MANDARIN CHINESE IN TWO TUCSON, ARIZONA HIGH SCHOOLS. IT WAS FELT THAT SUCH CHINESE LANGUAGE CLASSES WOULD BECOME A COMPETITIVE ALTERNATIVE TO TRADITIONAL HIGH SCHOOL LANGUAGE OFFERINGS ONLY IF THESE PIONEERING CLASSES PROVED VERY SUCCESSFUL. IN ANALYZING THE BACKGROUND OF THE 42 STUDENTS ENROLLED IN THE TWO SCHOOLS, IT WAS FOUND THAT (1) ALL OF THE STUDENTS ARE ON THE HONOR ROLE OR HAVE ABOVE AVERAGE GRADE RECORDS, (2) THE MAJORITY (29) ARE JUNIORS AND SENIORS, AND (3) 14 STUDENTS ARE OF CHINESE ANCESTRY AND HAVE VARYING RANGES OF READING AND WRITING SKILLS. SINCE THE CHINESE LANGUAGE IS CONSIDERED DIFFICULT TO LEARN, A COURSE IN THIS SUBJECT SHOULD NOT APPEAR TO BE AIMED SOLELY AT THE ABOVE-AVERAGE STUDENT OR THOSE WHO POSSESS CULTURAL ADVANTAGES. IN ORDER THAT THE EXTREMELY BRIGHT STUDENTS IN THE "CORE GROUP" SHOULD BE CHALLENGED AND THE AVERAGE STUDENT FEEL HE IS MAKING PROGRESS AS WELL, A SUPPLEMENTARY PROGRAM OF INDEPENDENT STUDY IN WRITTEN CHINESE WAS SET UP. REGULAR CLASSWORK IN THE FIRST YEAR IS PRIMARILY AUDIOLINGUAL AND IS ABOUT AS DIFFICULT AS OTHER FIRST-YEAR LANGUAGE COURSES. WRITTEN CHINESE IS PARTICULARLY WELL SUITED TO INDEPENDENT STUDY SINCE IT INVOLVES MAINLY THE ACQUISTION THROUGH MEMORIZATION OF IDEOGRAPHS. TWENTY-THREE STUDENTS VOLUNTEERED FOR THE INDEPENDENT WORK PROGRAM AND SET GOALS FOR THEMSELVES OF LEARNING FROM 160 TO 650 CHARACTERS. AFTER AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CHINESE WRITING SYSTEM, THE STUDENTS WORKED INDEPENDENTLY, TAKING TESTS WHEN THEY FELT PREPARED AND RE-TAKING TESTS WHEN THEY WERE NOT SATISFIED WITH THEIR ACCOMPLISHMENTS. STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN THE INDEPENDENT STUDY PROJECT DO NOT SEEM TO FEEL PENALIZED. IT IS HOPED THAT CHINESE LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION WILL EXPAND IN THE FUTURE BY SERVING BOTH THE AVERAGE AND THE ABOVE-AVERAGE STUDENT. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN THE JANUARY 1968 ISSUE OF THE "ARIZONA FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS' FORUM." (JD)

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Chinese Language Instruction in Tucson Public Schools -- Independent Study

by David M. Hooker

A program of Modern Chinese (Mandarin) language instruction was introduced into the curricula of two Tucson-area public schools in August, 1967. Although it represents a permanent addition to the language programs of the two schools, in a broader sense it is in fact an experiment. That is to say, it is generally understood that Chinese, if it is to become a viable, competitive alternative to "traditional" high school language offerings, must first gain a solid footing and then begin expanding rapidly, following a course laid down by Russian when it was introduced here ten years ago. The future of Chinese in Tucson will be determined in great part by its success or failure in the two pioneering schools. The possibility of beginning a center for Asian studies, similar to the one presently in existence in the Toledo public schools, was felt to be impractical here, primarily because of problems of transportation.

There are at the present time forty-two students enrolled in Chinese in the two schools. Although the total figure is encouraging, an initial analysis pointed to problems for the future that had not fully been anticipated. The following facts are among the most significant of those brought to light by that analysis. Each of them, should it become a trend, could have a profound effect upon future enrollment in Chinese:

(1) of the forty-two, more than thirty have been consistent honor roll students, and all have above-average records.

(2) seventeen are seniors, twelve are juniors; underclassmen total only thirteen.

(3) eleven students are of Chinese-American descent. All but one come from homes where Cantonese is spoken, and as a group they possess a wide range of reading and writing skills. There are in addition three students whose families only recently immigrated from Hong Kong; these three possess reading and writing skills roughly on

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a par with those one would expect to find among beginning graduate students.

In short, the initial enrollment in Chinese may be characterized as a kind of intellectual elite, composed largely of upperclassmen, who bring to the classroom cultural and linguistic backgrounds ranging from almost nil to highly competent.

The implication of these findings was obvious: Chinese could become too restrictive for its own good. It is weighted here, as elsewhere in this country, with its reputation (largely unwarranted) for great difficulty. To combine this with a reputation as a course that caters to select students or students who possess cultural advantages might not only inhibit a healthy growth in enrollment, it could possibly cause the program to destroy itself.

The problem, as seen here, boils down to a conflict between our responsibility to the students who will very likely become the core of our future enrollment and to our desire to see the program grow. Our "core" students possess not only good ability, they show a great deal of eagerness and self-confidence as well. All of them had, at one time or another, heard about the "difficulty" of Chinese. In response to direct questioning, however, almost all of the students stated that they had enrolled in Chinese in order to learn more about the Orient, and a significant number (seventeen!) added that they were looking for a challenge. Independent study of Chinese characters seemed to us to be a reasonable first step toward solving the problem of meeting everyone's needs--including our own.

The text employed in our program is Chinese-Mandarin, Level I, developed by the Chinese-Mandarin project at San Francisco State College with support from the United States Office of Education. It is the first of a four-level series designed ultimately to be used by freshmen enrolling in a four-year sequence. In the first year, the student is introduced to 750 vocabulary items (350 morphemes) and 160 characters, with an undetermined (but not particularly large) number of compounds. Its approach is primarily audio-lingual. The course, as outlined in the text, is

probably no more or less difficult than any other first year language course. The independent study program involves only the written Chinese language.

Written Chinese is particularly well suited to independent study; in many respects it is an entirely separate language. In lieu of an alphabet, it employs ideographs, and the ideographs are only partially phonetic. It is almost wholly uninflected, and differs from its spoken counterpart in many broad areas of vocabulary and syntactical construction. Knowledge of the basic principles of sentence construction is rather easily acquired. Thus, for all practical purposes, the learning process in elementary written Chinese is limited for the most part to the acquisition of new vocabulary (i.e., learning to read and write the ideographs). There is nothing intellectual about the process, nor are there any known shortcuts to easy mastery. Dividends are reaped in direct proportion to the amount of time and effort one devotes to his work, and thus it is perhaps uniquely suited to independent study.

Early last October the program was instituted at both high schools. The first classroom hour was devoted to a discussion--mostly for the benefit of juniors and seniors--of minimum requirements for entry into second year Chinese programs at various colleges and universities throughout the country. The next four hours were devoted to demonstrations of principles governing the proper writing of Chinese characters. During the sixth hour students were asked to submit to their instructor a statement of the goals they had set for themselves. Twenty-three students opted, voluntarily, to begin working toward goals that exceeded the minimum course requirement of 160 characters. The range extended from the minimum up to 650.

The students were given, for future reference, a series of mimeographed sheets that reiterated all the work covered in the first week of demonstrations. They also received a series of worksheets explaining the meaning and range of usage of each new character they encountered in their studies. And last, the testing procedure was explained to them.

The students doing independent work take tests only when they feel they are prepared to take them. If they do not like their grade, they are free to continue taking tests until they are satisfied with their accomplishement. Only the last grade is entered on their permanent class record, thus removing the punitive aspects of testing in favor of honest self evaluation. An adequate supply of pre-prepared tests is always available when the student needs them. Long-term goals in the program include reading The Lady in the Painting, a long Chinese folk-tale written at the 300-character level; and Lao Chai tales, a series of ghost stories written at the 650-character level. Ten minutes of each class hour are devoted to character study and testing. The teacher's role during that portion of the hour is entirely supervisory.

Although the independent study program still requires adjustment and polishing to iron out difficulties, the results after the first two months are gratifying. Three students have completed the minimum writing requirements for the entire year! While their progress is a phenomenon, there are twelve more who will have completed that requirement by the end of January. Most gratifying is the fact that the philosophy of independent study seems to have been accepted without reservation, that is, even those who have chosen not to participate (mostly underclassmen) seem to have done so with genuine appreciation of the fact that their goals just happen to be different, and that they are not going to suffer for it.

We believe that independent study will prove to be a solid first step toward the solution of our problem. The extremely bright students who came to Chinese looking for a challenge are being challenged--they challenge themselves, and they love it. There is room, too, for the average student to progress through a four-year sequence without suffering in comparison to his exceptionally able classmates, and hopefully this will be the area in which Chinese language instruction will realize its potential for growth.

(Catalina and Tucson High Schools - Tucson, Arizona)